

Back and Forth: Anna Jermolaewa's videographic shifting between bodies and time

More than ten years after the communist collapse, the dissolution of the East-West divide has brought about a new constellation of power relations with a legacy of shattered dreams and distorted views of past and present. Childhood memories and adult experiences have become like an incongruent puzzle, which has to be put together in order to constitute the post-modern, post-colonial, and post-socialist self in the wake of a newly emerging world order. For those who have ventured on various forms of ideological and political ground, the present social and political arena necessitates an amalgam of psychic interventions to live with the realities at stake. On an artistic level, these interim stages of perception are often represented through trivial objects and detail manipulations, which enforce a heightened awareness for the various levels within our thinking and acting processes.

A somewhat ironical and yet humorous approach to the psychological and physical depths of the individuals in our society, which, in a Freudian sense, emanate from early childhood experience, can be seen in the work of St. Petersburg-born and Vienna-based artist Anna Jermolaewa. An political refugee during the fall of the communist regime, Jermolaewa accidentally landed in Freud's city of dreams and repression, where she chose to reside until the present day. Now, after more than a decade of having been socialized as an artist in a western(ized) context, Jermolaewa is faced with the first major presentation of her work in the Russian capital. Originally a student of art history, Jermolaewa had not begun to study art until the late 1990s. Although having graduated quite recently, Jermolaewa's first semester piece, *Hendl Triptych*, from 1998 found immediate response by curator Harald Szeemann and was presented in his dAPERTutto show at the Venice Biennial of 1999. *Hendl Triptych* consists of a three-monitor video installation, where chicken are rotating and roasting on a grill. The slick surface and warm colors visually transfer the heat, which is used to make these dead animal parts bereft of their life-like function and thus ready for human consumption. The burning fire, however, eroticizes the yellowish chicken legs, and, through the extreme close-ups, transfers them from their original context into newly defined visual territory. *Hendl Triptych* was the first showing of a series of video works, in which Jermolaewa deals with the objectification and de-contextualization of animal behavior in the sphere of human dominance as well as the interaction between both wo/man and animal.

Her latest video, *Murka*, is one of the first to bear a Russian title, which would translate into something like "purring cat." The video shows a close-up of a cat lying in bed, and a fondling hand, which triggers the cat's purring noise. The position of the cat relates to the typical Venus pose in art history and makes the animal appear like a human being, with a body stretched out like a torso after losing weight due to a long-lasting sickness. And it is exactly this interim stage between animal and human behavior, signifying the evolutionary transition from prey to predator, savageness to domestication, empowerment and subjugation, which constitutes the central concern in Jermolaewa's playful and witty videographic work, where the sexual connotations of every movement become equally important to the subject's environment.

With her cunning sexualization of the everyday, Jermolaewa leads us into the world of desires, which make the absurd, obscene, or hidden look normal. The relation to animalistic and often distorted body postures embodied through objects and toys signals our physically and psychologically driven behavior in the respected social context. Revealing our inner drives in a wicked game of corporeal objectification, Jermolaewa's swift and capturing video loops always obtain a very fresh and young quality, such as her graduation piece from 2002, *Flower Bed*, where a woman's hand takes a watering can to sprinkle the genital zones of male bodies, whose penises suddenly become erect and thus grow like the flowers in one's backyard. This interference between natural and physical phenomena shows an affinity to the genre of Russian ultra-short films and makes critics like Joshua Decker see Jermolaewa as a

kind of “(postmodern) Russian philosophical prankster.”¹ The same also accounts for her piece *On/Off*(1999), where a hard penis touches a light switch to illuminate the scene. Again, it is the theme of the male genital as a substitute for the male body in general as well as the body of power and the Freudian readings of repressed child-like fantasies, (war) games and the desire to take control of any given situation, which Jermolaewa takes up with ironical distance from the position of the image maker.

In *Shooting* (2001), Jermolaewa directly aims at her first video camera with a gun in order to stimulate the desire to give up things past and enter new fields of artistic practice. The double projections show Jermolaewa with headgear and stretched out arms, until she pulls the trigger, while the projection to the side shows the camera upon being destroyed. Here, we are dealing with a form of desire, which entails a certain kind of loss. In a Lacanian sense, the birth of desire takes place with the entry into the world of language and thus into a meaning-generating phase. This symbolic order constitutes the lack or loss of the former state of being, the so-called imaginary order, in which the subject primarily relates to the world of objects. The loss of the video camera as the most important device for Jermolaewa’s artistic practice, however, does not keep her from returning to the stage, where objects and especially toys are meant to achieve some kind of wish fulfillment. Oscillating between childhood connotations and their reverberations in adult sexual desire makes Jermolaewa constantly go back and forth between the stages of psychological development and their social inclinations. One of these situations of constant backs and forths, ups and downs can be detected in the video *Trying to Survive*, where toy figures move like spinning tops on a smooth surface. What looks like a bowling set at the beginning, turns out to be a heavy fight until the protagonists literally fall apart. Although Jermolaewa goes the opposite way here by animating a rigid picture with humanizing effects, the factor of repetition entails a never-ending positioning between different poles (the incongruent puzzle parts), which are united in the end.

The shift between time referents, which are personally linked with ideologically and politically different socialization patterns, is equaled by a shift in body textures and postures. It is the usage of animals, toys, and male bodies, whose movements are activated through simple devices, which mostly distort and divert the function of the original. This can also be said about one of Jermolaewa’s latest pieces, *Monkey Theater*, where a monkey puppet changes its features according to the movements of the hand inside. Grimaces and disfigurement alternate the animation of what started out as a series of drawings of the same monkey puppet in 2000. The mixture of facial expressions of all sorts makes it difficult for viewers to negotiate a clear message statement. Thus, one could argue in Freud’s terminology, most of Jermolaewa’s work evokes a sense of scopophilia, a simple pleasure in looking, as well as a fascination with the human form. Freud attested this phenomenon especially in the voyeuristic activities of children who are on their way to discover the forbidden spheres, which are playfully approached and accepted with easiness and innocence. Jermolaewa takes this sensation one step further and adapts the scopophilic look to the viewer’s gaze. Fully aware of the classic structures of cinematic narration, where women obtain the role of the image bearer to leave men the controlling function of the gaze, Jermolaewa neutralizes this gender-specific gaze and, by using objects or toys, directs it into a child-like universe controlled by a videographic device. What remains is a conscious and quick switching between bodies and time, through which Jermolaewa’s work evokes visual pleasure, however blurring the field of representation where our self-recognition takes place.

Walter Seidl ,in:

- Anna Jermolaewa/Video,Ausst. Kat. f. L-Gallery,Moskau,2003.

¹ Joshua Decker. „Playing Along with Anna.” In: *Anna Jermolaewa. Big Sister / The Five Year Plan*. Gerald Matt, ed. Vienna: Triton, 2002. p. 18.

